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## The Space of Prayer

by Maggie Ross

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a terrible drought. The crops failed, the livestock died, the people were in misery. As the drought grew worse, they tried increasingly desperate measures. The shamans danced and banged pots, the priests made offerings to the gods, and the children went on pilgrimage to the mountains. A few individuals even shot arrows at a stray cloud, hoping to pierce the membrane that held back the water, or so they thought. Any charlatan

who came along claiming to be able to make rain fall was hired to try. Always the outcome was the same: he would take the money and run.

One day the villagers spied a beggar trudging down the road, leaning on his stick. "Go away old man," they said. "We don't have any food and water for ourselves, much less for the likes of you. And we're not hiring any more so-called rainmakers."

Unperturbed, the old man said, "Keep your food and drink, and your money. But if you will loan me a hut for three days and leave me in peace, who knows, something good may come of it."

So the villagers showed the beggar to a spacious if somewhat smelly chicken shed, whose clucking inhabitants had long since succumbed in the pounding heat, and the old man shut himself in. The villagers thought him mad and went their separate ways, muttering about the drought making people crazy, and who was going to pull the corpse out when the three days were over, and whether they should just burn the shed without opening it. But the novelty soon wore off, and one by one the villagers sank into the lassitude and despair that are the foretaste of death.

Two more stifling days passed. No one gave a thought to the old man; there was not even enough energy to curse with the curses of those who have been disappointed one too many times.

But on the third morning everyone awoke at almost the same moment. Something was different. The people came slowly out of their houses, wondering. A breeze so slight as to be barely perceptible caressed their faces. As they stood there, stunned with disbelief, the air itself began to change, becoming thick with humidity. Clouds piled up. Energy gathered until the air crackled with lightning. The people covered their ears, laughing at the tremendous booms of thunder and the rain pouring down in just the right quantity.

"But where is the old beggar?" asked a small boy who had been intrigued that anyone would want to be shut in a chicken shed whose stench never quite left him after he cleaned it each month. Everyone ran to the shed. The door was open, the beggar gone.

"There!" cried the boy, running after a speck limping toward the horizon. Everyone pelted after him.

"Old man!" the village headman called, gasping with exertion when the crowd finally caught up, "Don't leave us! We will make you king; we will feed and house you and give you such treasures as we have."

"Thank you," said the beggar, "but as you can see I have no use for kingship or treasures. As for food and drink, the fields and creatures supply me, and water falls from heaven."

"But if you won't stay with us," the headman wheedled, "please tell us your magic so that we can make it rain when there is another drought."

"There is no magic," replied the beggar, "and I am no sorcerer. The rain is always with you. But if you fill your world with too much activity and too much noise, if you cut all the trees and plough your fields relentlessly, the rain cannot gather itself from its hiding places to make a storm. All I did was to inhabit an empty space where the rain could find its focus and fall on its own terms."

*The  
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life*



**I**N AN AGE ADDICTED to “signs and wonders” (John 4:48), it is important to know what prayer is and what prayer is not.<sup>1</sup> The substituting of idols for faith and magic for prayer is an old, old story in both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The persistence of idols is linked to the need for reassurance, and idols can be mental as well as physical, what Chögyam Trungpa has called “spiritual materialism.”<sup>3</sup>

Keith Thomas describes a sixteenth-century distinction between prayer and magic: “Words and prayers . . . had no power in themselves, unless God chose to heed them; whereas the working of charms followed automatically upon their pronunciation.”<sup>4</sup> According to this distinction, the twenty-first century is not as far from the sixteenth as we might hope. But the sixteenth-century description does not go far enough.

The difference between prayer and magic is an attitude toward the future. If theology has forgotten it, Einstein reminds us that there are many futures. Prayer, especially intercessory prayer, is opening to this possibility of many futures. Magic wishes to limit us to only one. Magic tries to exert total short-term control over a single, narrowly focused aspect of life, heedless of the long-term consequences or ripple effect on others’ lives.

In our desperation to pray for a loved one in crisis or for our own needs and desires, we often feel strongly about what the best outcome should be, and we frame our prayers (and sometimes fill them with bribes) toward this end. These prayers are useful if they help us examine what we think and feel, but our knowledge and understanding of the larger picture, much less the depth of the heart of the person we are praying for, is at best fragmentary and provisional. In reality it is impossible for us to know what will work for the highest good, and unless our prayer is underpinned and ringed about with “Thy will be done” it is no better than magic.

By contrast, true prayer tries to gather what needs attention and *let go of it in the love of God*. Or, to use a metaphor that arises from the story of the old man and the rainstorm, prayer creates a space in which things have a chance to work themselves out without being limited or distorted by human pressure or interference (Eph. 3:20).

One of the oldest meanings of the word “salvation” is to be brought into an open space where enemies cannot surprise or trap. “He brought me out into an

open place; he rescued me because he delighted in me” (Ps. 18:20).<sup>5</sup> Most of the time we cry out to God because we perceive ourselves to be trapped in some way. We feel ourselves being drawn by circumstances out of our control into the vortex of a single inexorable future. The same obsessive thoughts and fears repeat over and over. If these obsessive thoughts become obsessive prayers, we are only sinking more deeply into what we fear. But if in the depths of our interior silence we simply name the problem, this naming can open our perspective and may even set in motion the process of resolution in the space where we wait on God, the space where there are many futures. If we are in such a state of torment that we think we have no silence (it’s there, underneath all the noise, which is composed merely of ephemeral thoughts), all we have to do is toss our cry for silence into the maelstrom, and follow it as it sinks beneath the surface.<sup>6</sup>

Intercession has often been spoken of as “the work of prayer,” but while we may have to work at praying, prayer itself is not work. The prayer we are conscious of praying is a clearing-out of our works and ways; we name them so that we can leave behind their limitations. Weeping is often a sign of this emptying-out, the relinquishing of our efforts to control the future. Weeping is a sign of our letting go of power so that God’s power can move through us. It is the sign of transfiguration, of new creation.

*In this density of holiness we are raised out of time to that...primordial silence [in which] all expansion, all possibility are held in potent stillness as our tears mingle and ignite with that single, certain drop from the abyss.... Tears are our bodies’ participation in theosis [realizing the divinity within]; in these tears we see the beginning of the transfiguration of all creation which will be accomplished by Christ in and through us. Tears are the Refiner’s fire; tears are the sorrow caught in beauty and joy; tears are the mirroring of the Consuming Fire who weeps.<sup>7</sup>*

Having named our needs and concerns, we are led to understand that we do not know how to pray but that the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26–27).



**I**NTERCESSION BEGINS with recognizing in humble confidence that we are created in the imageless image of God, that we share God's nature, that the very fact that we exist means that we share God's life. We are "on(y)d" with God, as Julian of Norwich would say, or "in union" with God, to use the phrase of other writers. Prayer, especially intercessory prayer, is dependent on this shared nature.

The purpose of prayers and rites, which churches too often seem to have forgotten, is to clear away the noise and confusion of our problems and sickness by naming them and letting them go into silence, to bring us into the open place, the empty space, where there are many futures, where anything can happen, even resurrection. The key phrase here is "letting go," for to intercede truly we must let go our possessive ideas not only of what the outcome ought to be, but what the problem is in the first place. Being silent together for an extended time is a particularly effective way for groups not only to pray for others but also to seek a way forward for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Being silent together also helps those who may be apprehensive about silence to enter it in the context of a supportive community. But too often such gatherings deteriorate into competition, narcissism, and banality. Being silent together should be simply that: being silent together. There should be no spoken reflections before and certainly not after the silence, no declared intentions. At the appointed time people enter in silence, learn to sit in stillness for the allotted time while remaining perfectly relaxed,<sup>9</sup> and leave in silence. There should be no discussion before or afterwards, at any time, about participants' "impressions" of what happened or didn't happen, what it "felt" like, or any sort of evaluation or commentary about people or situations relating to the time of silence together. Difficulties with silence that may arise in an individual usually resolve themselves if that person simply sits with them.<sup>10</sup>

Another way to talk about intercession might be to say that because the life we have is a share in God's life, when we pray on behalf of another, we are creating a space for God to use that life as is most appropriate, according to God's light, not ours. Because of our shared nature with God, in this space our life becomes God's life: God's tears, God's offering, God's power. We set God free to work his mysterious love in ways that we should not care to seek to know, if we are rightly focused on God. Some people wake each night to devote a specific amount of time to this conscious offering of their lives on behalf of the world, to make a space, however humble, where some small fragment of human suffering can perhaps find a little respite and peace.

There are as many ways of intercession as there are moments of life. Intercession can become deep and habitual, hidden even from our selves.

There is nothing exotic about such practice. What matters is the intention that creates the space and the stillness. Even something as simple as refusing to anesthetize the gnawing pain in the pit of your soul that is a resonance of the pain of the human condition is a form of habitual intercession. To bear this pain into the silence is to bring it into the open place of God's infinite mercy. It is in our very wounds that we find the solitude and openness of our re-creation and our being. We learn to go to the heart of pain to find God's new life, hope, possibility, and joy. This is the priestly task of our baptism.<sup>11</sup>

After a time, the practice of bearing our concerns—and our joy—into the place of silence becomes habitual. We learn that the most precious gift that we have to

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offer to anyone, in person or in prayer—one which can be given only in secret—is a space where they too can enter silence, where they can dwell without pressure or manipulation to receive the unmediated transfiguration of God’s love.

We come to realize that in this spacious silence the whole of creation is present and that we are given the eyes of compassion. We realize that every moment is prayer, life is prayer, and it is lived from the wellspring of this silence.

This sort of prayer is only preparation, however. Real prayer, says Isaac of Nineveh, begins when we are no longer aware that we are praying at all.

*As soon as the mind has crossed this boundary of pure prayer and proceeded inwards, it possesses neither prayer, nor emotions, nor tears, nor authority, nor freedom, nor petitions, nor desire, nor longing after any of these things which are hoped for in this world or in the world to come. . . . From here onwards the mind has ceased from prayer; there is sight, but the mind does not actually pray.<sup>12</sup>*

The deepest form of intercession is simply to open ourselves and offer God the life given us, wordlessly, in silence and stillness, in adoration, not knowing and not wanting to know for what purposes our life might be used, or what consequences, if any, there might be.<sup>13</sup> Intercession is making a space for something to be worked out, we know not how. It is tearing a hole in the imprisoning membrane of our thoughts and fears so that the rain of salvation may fall on us (Isa. 45:8). And when we have been denuded of our ideas of how the world should be, or even what the problem is, and enter this space of intercession, we find to our wonder and joy that we are wearing the robe of glory of our original nakedness, signing the world with the full potential of Eden. In this vast and fertile wilderness, we offer the life we share with God, and we wait on that Loving-kindness in a silence that is both end and beginning, our source and our home.

*Editor’s Note: This article is closely related to the author’s “Whatever Happened to Discretion?” in the May/June 2007 issue of Weavings.*

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture references are to the New Revised Standard Version Bible unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>See especially Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), and Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 61. He goes on to point out that attempts to reform idolatrous attitudes tend to push people into ritualism on the one hand and ideology on the other.

<sup>5</sup>*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corp., 1977), 604.

<sup>6</sup>Impasse is a different problem altogether. See Constance Fitzgerald’s “Impasse and Dark Night” at [www.geocities.com/baltimorecarmel/johncross/impasse.html](http://www.geocities.com/baltimorecarmel/johncross/impasse.html)

<sup>7</sup>Maggie Ross, *The Fountain and the Furnace: The Way of Tears and Fire* (Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1987), 230–31.

<sup>8</sup>Full instructions for a rite of Contemplative Eucharist are archived in January, 2006 at [ravenwilderness.blogspot.com](http://ravenwilderness.blogspot.com).

<sup>9</sup>Taken alone, learning to sit this way for half an hour, just being aware of the body (never mind “prayer”), can be the single most helpful spiritual exercise that anyone can learn.

<sup>10</sup>The best book on problems in prayer is by Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup>This paragraph is modified from my *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood and Spiritual Maturity*, chaps. 4 and 5 (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

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<sup>12</sup>Ross, *The Fountain and the Furnace*, 251. St. Isaac's text trans. Sebastian Brock. The context may be found in *The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Dana Miller (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984).

<sup>13</sup>Buddhists facilitate this sort of prayer by the practice of tonglen, breathing in darkness and breathing out light on the world. See Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, reprint ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).



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